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ABSTRACT

The English teaching profession must accept the fact that the new paradigm for composition involves microcomputers and word processors, and as such calls for a somewhat different set of skills on the part of both students and teachers. The "text editor" can lessen the effects of some physical and psychological constraints on students, allowing them to write more quickly and more closely to the language of their thoughts. Further, virtually any exposure to computers helps students learn to live with and to earn a living in a post-industrial technological society. To some, however, it still seems somehow petty, even perverse, to let an electronic device based upon simple binary code determine the form and sometimes the content of complex interhuman communication. But the rest of the world will not wait for educational leaders to make pronouncements upon the worthiness of every mechanical and technological advance, and the majority of students will end up not at the heads of classrooms, but in business and industry. It is hard to find a professional journal without encountering at least a few good words about computer assisted instruction. On-screen writing is a convenience to students and a powerful draw into the composing and revising process, but less promising for drill-and-practice and tutorials. This advanced technology should not be attached to an old and worn pedagogy. The English teaching profession's strides into the world of microcomputers must be sure as well as swift. (HTH)

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Arguing for Computer-Based Composition Instruction

I.

With a series of quick and decisive victories, microelectronics reigns supreme over the lands of Science, Social Science, Government, and Business, to mention just the incontrovertibly occupied territory, and its influence at all levels of Education increases every day. One of the few remaining areas where there are pockets of resistance is the English/Language Arts Department, and what follows is in part an attempt to convince the holdouts that an old order has passed. The image of that order--and granted, it is still a ubiquitous image, as was the royal court for decades after the French Revolution--is a student sitting at a desk in composition class writing with pen or pencil upon a lined theme pad.

A major fact of contemporary life that our profession should come to recognize and accept is that fewer and fewer people in the world outside the classroom actually write that way anymore. A new paradigm for the composition of common written documents, especially correspondence and reports, is firmly entrenched almost everywhere. It has as its basis keyboard-screen-printer paraphernalia rather than ink or graphite on paper; its all-important periphery includes such widely available software as spelling-grammar checkers and outline generators. As such, it calls for a somewhat different set of skills on the part of both student and teacher, even if the thinking processes involved remain basically the same--and recent research

suggests that they may not remain so, not entirely. Just to mention one small but significant difference already demonstrated by several studies at the college level (including Kiefer and Smith[1], Collier[2]), the attitude of the majority of wordprocessor-using students toward writing and revision has significantly changed--they can and do learn to enjoy writing. That fact alone would seem to require some alteration of stance at the head of the classroom as well.

Many composition instructors know all about computer technology and either use it or despise it--or both. But research (Selfe[3], Larsen[4]) suggests that, if representative sampling can be trusted, most English instructors remain either deliberately or blissfully (or, again, both) incognizant of the inroads that computers are making onto their turf. I will attempt two things here:

1. specifically, bring instructors up to date on relevant microcomputer technology both inside and outside of the profession;
2. generally, comment on some of the research being done on the impact of this technology in the classroom.

II

Beginning with Janet Emig's "Writing as a Mode of Learning,"[5] research has demonstrated that one of the most important things that should be done in composition class is teaching students how to learn--that is, helping them to acquire those special abilities that make them more fully able to continue to develop in life, to participate instead of vegetate, to catch rather than beg for fish. Emig is particularly keen to point out that writing involves "a

cluster of attributes that corresponds uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (p.122). She goes on to mention how deeply it engages the three parts of the body that are active in optimal learning situations: the hand, the eye, and, of course, the brain.

It is my contention that we must look at this process in a slightly different light when the computer is employed. Colette Daiute has demonstrated that the "text editor is a writing instrument that can lessen the effects of some physical and psychological constraints" upon student writers.[6] Released from such burdens as <u>some</u> of the neuromuscular activity required for working with pen-and-pad and <u>much</u> of the mental effort of short-term retention, writers "free themselves for thinking" (p.144). This relief derives in part from the speed with which one can get ideas up on the screen--some 50% faster than with an electric typewriter for most writers, and with little concern for the slowdowns and screeching halts that typos engender. It has yet to be demonstrated that this rapidity has any adverse effects; indeed, it probably brings the writer closer to a style of language that approximates an ideal mix of the spoken and the written, ridding many students of their tendency toward "Engfish," to borrow Ken Macrorie's term for the unnatural, stilted style of composition that many students think English teachers appreciate. They write closer to their real selves, so to speak: their inmost thoughts rapidly, creatively branch and re-branch; their minds become catalyzed, testing here, tasting there, opening new windows for ever better views. Freed to think thus comes to mean freed to learn.

But the impact of computer use goes further. We have a post-industrial technological society now, and virtually any exposure to computers helps students learn to live in it as well as to earn a

living from it. I feel no hesitation whatsoever (released, as I am, from the protocol of the Old Order) about putting my students in front of a keyboard and monitor on the majority of class days. In my courses, that is part of their experience of learning to write and learning to learn, even if "learning to learn" occasionally means only gaining another mundane measure of computer literacy. Today's student is, in general, more eager and perhaps more able to learn from a video screen than from a printed page. I am not about to invoke the spirit of McLuhan, but the more interactive electronic screens (especially games) become part of the learning process, the more today's student gets turned on to the learning itself. As educators we have our choice of either fighting this tide or finding an intelligent way to roll with it.

To some, it still seems somehow petty, perverse even, to let an electronic device based upon simple binary code (everything is either one or two to a computer, an on-current or an off-current) determine the form and sometimes the content of complex inter-human communication. Feelings of rebellion take, under the best of circumstances, such forms of counter-insurgency as that expressed in general terms by Antonie Gollan and in field-specific terms by Robert Hertz. Deriding the computer as just another pretty face, a neo-Skinnerian "stimulus-response teaching machine," Gollan claims that like its predecessors it "rejects the development of reason" and "ought to be as welcome around a school building as a dope dealer."[7] Less hostile and somewhat closer to the mark, Hertz says that "a subject as open-ended and not clearly delineated" as writing should be spared from computerized scrutiny.[8] While I concede (all sound arguments having at least one concession) that at

present computers cannot adequately judge the merit of such apparent intangibles as style or ingenuity, at present no one is asking them to. Plans are underway somewhere to bring the state of the art to this point as well, I am sure, for wherever there is labor to be saved computers intrude their digitized snouts. Questions as to whether such a development will be for the good of students must be held in abeyance until the technology hits market, at which time it will either swim or sink. We are in the midst an irrepressible surge toward total computerization, and only whatever wisdom is inherent in our profession will winnow out the bad from the usable and the enlightened. Like William Wresch, I too believe that vis-à-vis computers "we are acting professionally" and will continue to do so[9]; our respect for our students greatly exceeds that of the average salesperson for his or her customers.

Still, these are legitimate concerns raised by Collan, Hertz, and others; for readers of similar persuasions, I cite the advent of the handheld calculator, which many regarded as heralding the end of basic math skills forever. None of the scare-press scenarios ever resulted from common, everyday use of the calculator, however, and its universal acceptance in classrooms followed its enthusiatic reception in the real world (that place again) by no more than half a dozen years. While the analogy between microcomputer and heldheld calculator breaks down in a heap of diodes if pushed too far, it does make one concept evident: the rest of the world will not wait around for educational leaders to make pronouncements upon the worthiness of every mechanical and technological advance; if it works <u>out there</u> people will find a way to use it. A potential counter-argument may run along the lines of "who gives a fig what business and industry do?";

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but we need to remind ourselves that the vast majority of our students will end up not at the heads of classrooms but in business and industry.

III.

Because of the zeal that one tends to acquire working with computers and their applications, the evangelists seem to be up to the task of trumpeting in a new age. As composition director at Montclair State College in New Jersey, Lawrence Schwartz has found that wordprocessing aids many of his students in a number of ways. His bottom-line opinion is "that it is now possible, both technologically and financially, to give every student free access to these powerful instruments and to end the so-called 'crisis' in basic writing skills."[10] It is hard to pick up a professional journal nowadays without encountering at least a few good words about computer-asisted learning. In a couple of enlightening articles in College English[11], Wresch has described promising applications of and results with computer technology, while Helen J. Schwartz will soon bring out the first textbook on computerized composition, to be called Interactive Writing: Composition with Word Processing (Holt). And educators who keep abreast of high tech know that WANDAH and HOMER may soon be in classrooms along, perhaps, with an EPISTLE from IBM.

Regarding the financial conditions under which computerization of composition is likely to continue evolving, I point to a general loosening of the purse strings for high-tech applications in pre-college education and to a snowballing trend among colleges across the nation to require their students to purchase personal computers as a condition of attendance at the school. The day can be foreseen when

virtually every student will either possess or have unlimited access to a microcomputer. Uncovering the resources for such essential purchases should not be overwhelmingly difficult; it will surely devolve to a matter of priorities. The computer companies themselves are currently making such prioritizing easier by reducing their prices to educational institution purchasers; for example, Apple Corporation offers its advanced Macintosh model to retail buyers at $2500 while students under bona fide purchase plans can obtain the same machine for about half that price. These offers are not a form of charity: each machine requires application programs, and the companies naturally plan to profit in the long run from such loss-leads both through software sales and by building customer attachments to one of their models.

On-screen writing is a convenience to students and a powerful draw into the composing and revising process, but I confess that I have mixed feelings about the common use of the computer for drill-and-practice and tutorials. On the one hand, I cannot deny some of the benefits that Michael Southwell suggested a few years ago:

1. consistent and patient individualized instruction;
2. required involvement (interactivity) of the learner;
3. the fostering of a concern for accuracy in the learner;
4. relative privacy for the act of learning.[12]

Southwell was writing of developmental students; consideration of "regular" students' needs leads me to qualify my endorsement of these forms of CAL. For I have seen, on the proverbial other hand, some bright and even not-so-bright students resent the hell out of IBM-PC's and Apple IIe's, especially when those poor dumb machines try to reroute them over the same old grammar rules and regulations that have

hounded them from the third grade on. Even some programs that supposedly lead students through an invention process have obvious weaknesses, most notably in their tendency to ask blatantly open-ended questions that the computer cannot possibly be programmed to respond to on an individual-by-individual basis. It does not take some students long to figure out that to the computer they are no more than an N$--a string variable--and that the queries it makes of Johnny's and Janie's writing plans are strictly from stock. The promising work of the Rodrigueses at New Mexico State University may lead to the general availability of worthwhile invention software[13].

In general, Schwartz echoes my sentiments when he refuses to "advocate that this advanced technology be attached to the 'old' pedagogy"(p.35). It is a brave new world of microelectronics, and our strides forward in it must be sure as well as swift.

NOTES

1. Kathleen E. Kiefer and Charles R. Smith, "Textual Analysis with Computers: Tests of Bell Laboratories' Computer Software," Research in the Teaching of English, 17 (October 1983), 201-214.

2. Richard M. Collier, "The Word Processor and Revision Strategies," College Composition and Communication, 34 (May 1983), 149-155.

3. Cynthia L. Selfe, "Dancing on the Cutting Edge: English Teachers and Computers," Focus: Teaching English Language Arts, 9 (Spring 1983), 80-88.

4. Richard E. Larsen, "Getting on the Computer Bandwagon," Focus: Teaching English Language Arts, 9 (Spring 1983), 44-47.

5. Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," College Composition and Communication, 28 (May 1977), 122-128.

6. Colette A. Daiute, "The Computer as Stylus and Audience," College Composition and Communication, 34 (May 1983), 134.

7. Antonie Gollan, "The Case Against the Classroom Computer," Consumers' Research, 67 (March 1984), 20.

8. Robert M. Hertz, "Problems of Computer-Assisted Instruction in Composition," The Computing Teacher, 11 (September 19830, 64.

9. William Wresch, "Computers and Composition Instruction: An Update," College English, 45 (December 1983), 799.

10. Lawrence J. Schwartz, "Teaching Writing in the Age of the Word Processor and Personal Computers," Educational Technology, 23 (June 1983), 33.

11. Wresch, "Computers in English Class: Finally Beyond Grammar and Spelling Drills," College English, 44 (September 1982), 483-490, and "Computers and Composition Instruction: An Update," College English, 45 (December 1983), 794-799.

12. Michael G. Southwell, "Using Computer-Assisted Instruction for Developmental Writing," AEDS Journal, 15 (1982), 91.

13. Raymond J. and Dawn W. Rodrigues, "Computer-Based Invention: Its Place and Its Potential," College Composition and Communication, 35 (February 1984), 78-87.